

## ***Chicago Daily Law Bulletin***

### **Push For Legal-Aid Funding is Under Way in Springfield**

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A coalition of bar association lobbyists and influential political players such as former U.S. senator Paul Simon, former governor James R. Thompson and Supreme Court Chief Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow have gone to work to protect and eventually increase the amount of money that Illinois spends on legal-aid services.

Last fall, the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign kicked off with the formation of a blue-ribbon committee of leaders who agreed to support efforts to increase state funding of legal aid. Simon and Thompson co-chair the committee, which also includes Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, Chief Cook County Judge Timothy C. Evans, Cook County State's Attorney Richard A. Devine and other prominent leaders.

The campaign is now getting down to business, as lobbyists for the Illinois State and Chicago bar associations have begun to meet with members of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's staff who are building the proposed budget that will go to the legislature in April, said Susan Pierson, the executive director of the Illinois Bar Foundation.

The goal is to protect for now the approximately \$480,000 that the state currently pays for legal-aid services provided to the poor and try to increase the funding to about \$5 million a year -- the average amount that the 10 most populous states pay for legal aid -- by the end of Blagojevich's first term, she said.

"We recognize these are tough budget times, but it's important that this money stays in the budget," Pierson said. She noted that Illinois ranks last among the 10 most populous states in legal aid funding, far below the \$2.4 million that No. 9 Georgia pays. California pays about \$10 million a year, while New Jersey pays about \$12 million for legal aid to the poor.

Bringing Illinois up to an average amount of legal aid funding in the next four years should not be seen as an unrealistic goal, she said.

Simon said he has supported legal aid funding for years, going back to the 1980s when he led the fight in Congress to protect the federal funding for the programs when President Ronald Reagan tried to make cuts. Simon's daughter, Sheila J. Simon, worked for five years starting in 1987 as an attorney for Land of Lincoln Legal Services in Carbondale, he said.

"I see a lot of poor people who need legal help," the former senator said. "If we can't provide legal help for all people, our system becomes massively flawed."

Simon, who heads the Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, said he will be willing to help in the effort to increase legal aid funding in the state's budget.

"This is a question of whether we are going to have an adequate legal system," he said. Legal-aid organizations in Illinois receive about \$30 million a year, mostly through federal funding and private donations. Less than 2 percent of the funds come from the state budget.

But much of the money is in danger as Illinois' portion of federal funds has been reduced by about \$1 million because of lower U.S. Census figures for people in need, and because of challenges in the U.S. Supreme Court to the use of Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts as a means of funding legal services.

Private donations have also been down in this sluggish economy, said Ruth Ann Schmitt, executive director of the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, which distributes IOLTA funds to legal-aid providers.

"The amount of money going to legal services has not increased, it's actually decreased, since 1990. Just maintaining offices, especially downstate in rural areas, is very, very difficult," she said. "It's time for the state to weigh in and do its share."

Studies by the American Bar Association, the CBA and ISBA indicate that about one in five families facing legal problems has access to legal help, according to Equal Justice Illinois information.

Robert A. Graves, executive director of the Chicago Bar Foundation, said that private attorneys perform thousands of hours of pro bono work to help meet the need for legal services, but that adequately addressing the legal needs of the poor is a social issue that goes beyond the legal community. Spending money on legal services can cut costs for social services, as it can cut the incidence of domestic violence, homelessness and the need for child protection, he said.

Thompson echoed that comment in literature prepared for the campaign.

"Increasing the appropriation for civil legal aid is a wise long-term investment for Illinois," Thompson said.